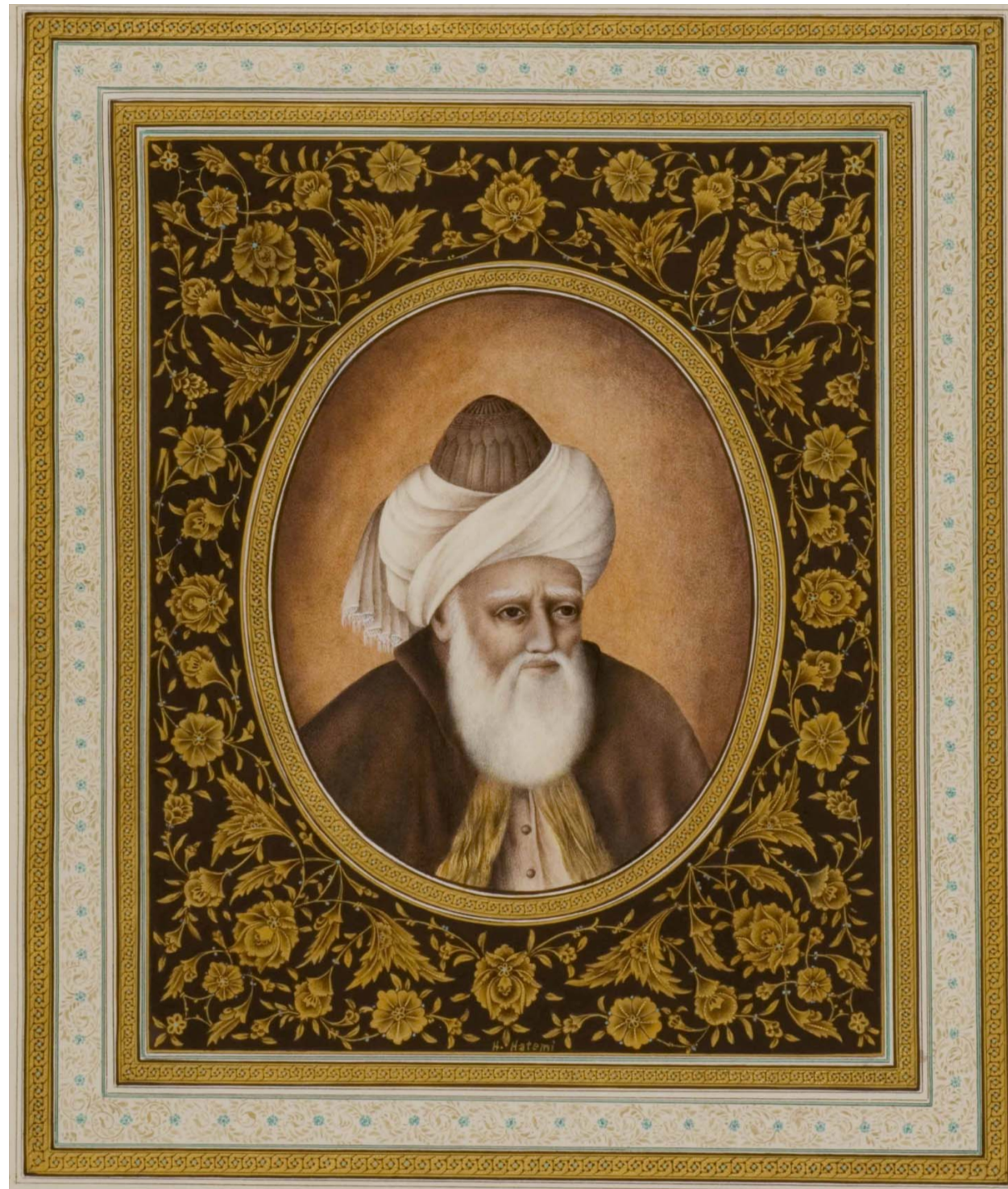


Jalaluddin Rumi: On a Journey from Persia to Hollywood

By SATYA PAUL ANAND

After centuries of enthralling the Muslim world, Jalaluddin Rumi has arrived in the United States. What is it about the Sufi poet that charms Americans?



A portrait of Rumi by Iranian American artist Haydar Hatemi.

Christopher Columbus was discovering America about the time that Jalaluddin Rumi's Sufi poetry was captivating Persia and the whole Muslim world. It had taken just over 200 years for his words to spread through the Middle East. The question for me is: Why did it take so many more centuries for Rumi to reach America?

Better late than never. The news is that now, in the 21st century, Rumi has finally arrived in the United States to a great welcome. The obvious reason for such a reception is that he has influenced Hollywood, which is the gateway to American popularity for a poet, artist, actor, dancer or singer.

When the India-born pop guru Dr. Deepak Chopra, now based in Southern California, rendered some of Rumi's poetry into American English a few years ago, he ushered in an aesthetic and spiritual revolution of sorts. Chopra, who preaches a pop version of yoga and spiritual enlightenment, prepared a CD of a selection of Rumi's translated works with help from some of the best musical talents in Hollywood. That top-notch music attracted several producers, actors, actresses, models and executives to Rumi's work. Chopra had already been popular among these people.

The CD is aptly titled *Gift of Love* and the message is close to the heart of Chopra, a physician of Punjabi extraction.

Among those who have cooperated with Chopra on the CD are composer Philip Glass, the singer Madonna, and actors Martin Sheen, Goldie Hawn and Demi Moore.

Now, after so many centuries, what makes Rumi still so vibrant? Like Shams Tabrez, his mentor, Rumi was a poet and considered a Sufi saint. So, what truck does he have with Hollywood's millionaire actors and directors? The fact is that when American author F. Scott Fitzgerald translated the *Rubaiyat* of Persian poet Omar Khayyam, he inadvertently laid the foundations of a misconception that endures today. That misconception was: the entire poetic tradition of Arabia and Persia was about wine, women, feminine charm and male infatuation. Before that, when the tales of *Alf Laila* (*Arabian Nights*) and an Urdu epic, *Amir Hamza*, were translated into English, the impression created was that the Middle East offered nothing but decadent opulence, and its literature was largely focused on sensual gratification as exemplified in the dictum of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in what is today's India, Pakistan and Bangladesh: "O Babur, enjoy the pleasures of life as there will be no afterlife."



Dr. Deepak Chopra called on his contacts in Hollywood and the music industry to produce a CD of some of Rumi's translated works.

In 1995, Coleman Barks, a professor at the University of Georgia, translated the quartets and *ghazals* of Rumi into English and published them as *The Essential Rumi*. However, Barks was not the first American scholar to dabble with Rumi.

He has written about the day when the American poet Robert Bly visited him. Bly was carrying a moth-eaten book, a 19th-century translation of Rumi's *ghazals* and quartets. Bly grabbed Barks by his shoulders and made him sit in a chair, saying: "As long as I keep reading from this book, don't get up from here."

"How could I get up from the chair? As long as Bly kept reading from the book, I sat listening to him, hypnotized," Barks wrote, describing the event years later. And then Bly virtually commanded him: "These words are fluttering inside a cage. Set them free."

The Essential Rumi was born in 1995. After selling thousands of copies, the book has spawned dozens of Web sites where Rumi aficionados can order a copy online. One learns new facts about Rumi every day from magazines, newspapers and newsletters. Nigel Watts' book *The Way of Love* is another step toward introducing Rumi to a larger audience.

So, what is it about Rumi that charms North Americans? Nowadays, I live in Cambridge, a suburb of the Canadian city, Toronto. That is why when I came to learn from an advertisement in a newspaper that a musical show on Rumi was to be presented

at the Roy Thomson Hall, I bought a \$25 ticket. The show was strangely called “Monsters of Grace.” The title seemed to be a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. Monsters and grace seemed to belong to two different worlds. Composer Philip Glass and Robert Wilson graced the occasion. Being a columnist of an English weekly and an Urdu poet made it easier for me to access and chat with them. I was told that the *ghazals* and quartets being performed were taken from *The Essential Rumi*.

The first rendition was called “Where Everything is Music,” which was set against a three-dimensional image of an endless Arabian desert. It was sung in the lyrical style of Urdu poetry in a collage of the Persian and English languages. At the end of the show, I asked some people, “Do you know Sufism?” Their flat answer was, “No.” I asked, “Then what brought you here?” Their answer was, “Poetry and music. Gosh, how great people lived in the 13th century!”

Now all that has been compiled into an album. Many of the songs are sung to the accompaniment of a single-stringed instrument called the *ektara* in the Indian subcontinent. This also happens to be the quintessential Middle Eastern musical instrument. You feel as if old, primeval memories of the boundless desert’s nomadic life buried in our collective subconscious have come to life. If I say that I was transported to another world sitting in the theater, I would not be exaggerating. The opening lines of

*My heart is burning with love.
All can see its flames.*

sung in a haunting voice, can send one into a trance.

It begins like a whispered chant, rises to a crescendo, and tapers off through the voices of Madonna, Hawn and Sheen, dissolving finally into silence. In turn, singers present it solo and in duet, sustaining the magic for nearly an hour. I had seen Indian instruments like the *sitar*, *ektara*, *bansuri* and *harmonium* behind the stage. During the show, I could discern their notes.

Later, Chopra said in an interview that he had not made a literal translation of Rumi in his presentation but used corresponding moods for the original text.

Newsweek magazine’s review called it “Love Machine.” Love signifying the whole range, from a sublime devotion to God to carnal desire and its fulfillment, the review’s title (and the review itself) was a comprehensive comment on it.



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Please share your views on this article.

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